

AMERICAS

Venezuela's Two Legislatures Duel, but Only One Has Ammunition

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By KIRK SEMPLE NOV. 3, 2017

CARACAS, Venezuela — The national legislature has not passed a law all year, and its members — those still willing to go through the motions of representative democracy — have on occasion struggled to come up with enough lawmakers to conduct any business.

Its administrative building is a wasteland of empty desks, inert computers and malaise. Hallways are cast in an ever-deepening dusk as light bulbs burn out and are not replaced for lack of money. The legislative information office, which prints documents for committees and outside groups, has no paper. Not that it matters much: The copy machines ran out of toner last summer.

These are grim days for the National Assembly of Venezuela.

The legislature, which has been led by the opposition since last year, was neutered over the summer when President Nicolás Maduro engineered the creation of a new lawmaking body composed entirely of his supporters, a move widely criticized in Venezuela and abroad as unconstitutional. The new entity, the Constituent Assembly, was formed to rewrite the Constitution, though its members

quickly granted themselves wide-ranging authority to write and pass legislation, allowing the body to supersede the National Assembly.

The move produced the bizarre scenario of a nation with dueling legislatures: one with absolute power, the other with none. They both use the same wing of the 19th century Capitol for their sessions, although at different times of day to ensure no unpleasant encounters occur in the corridors.

Each body has accused the other of illegitimacy and of engaging in a pantomime of democracy.

“It’s a total tragicomedy,” sighed Juan Guaidó, an opposition legislator in the National Assembly representing the state of Vargas. “It seems like a joke.”

The political crisis has unfolded as Venezuela has sunk deeper into economic despair. The financial outlook became even murkier on Thursday when Mr. Maduro said he would seek restructuring of Venezuela’s enormous foreign debt, a move seriously complicated by American sanctions.

The National Assembly’s demise was perhaps foretold when the opposition took control of the body after elections in December 2015. It was the first time in many years that the opposition had a legislative majority, ensuring a power struggle with Mr. Maduro and his United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

The president and his allies started chipping away at congressional powers.

The Supreme Court, stacked with judges loyal to Mr. Maduro, nullified nearly all pieces of legislation that the Assembly passed in 2016 and stripped it of its budgetary oversight powers, saying its leaders were in contempt of court for ignoring an order that barred the swearing-in of several opposition politicians whom the ruling party said had engaged in electoral fraud.

Citing the contempt ruling, the Maduro administration squeezed the Assembly’s budget, cutting the salaries and expenses of its representatives, and legislators from his party stopped attending its sessions. The Supreme Court even transferred legislative powers from the Assembly to itself, but in the face of international condemnation reversed much of its decision.

Mr. Maduro has also sought to silence dissent in other ways, including prosecuting opposition leaders. On Friday, the Supreme Court allowed the lifting of parliamentary immunity for Freddy Guevara, the National Assembly's vice president, whom the government has accused of crimes for his involvement in street protests this year.

Opposition legislators and the legislature's staff liken the two-year ordeal to a prolonged strangulation.

"It seems to be a strategy to see how much we can take," said José Ángel, an administrative assistant in the National Assembly's office building.

Still, the legislature has continued to hobble along through sheer force of will, struggling to maintain legislative procedure and respond to constituents' concerns.

"Under no condition are we going to stop doing what the people have asked us to do," said Delsa Solórzano, an opposition legislator.

Mostly, though, the National Assembly has become a platform for the opposition to criticize the Maduro administration. A recent session was dedicated to allegations of government corruption in regional elections on Oct. 15. A commission hearing last month featured testimony about political prisoners.

"It's the little space that we have to resist," Mr. Guaidó said.

But sometimes it has failed to make the best of what little space remains. On Tuesday morning, dozens of National Assembly members and their aides gathered for a session at the Capitol. After a two-hour delay, it was canceled because not enough lawmakers showed up. The dispirited representatives slunk away.

The legislature's desperate condition is cause for glee among politicians allied with the Maduro administration.

"The National Assembly in this moment doesn't exist!" crowed Jesús Faría, a member of the Constituent Assembly and a former foreign trade minister under Mr. Maduro. "They are there. There's the stage set. They pass some sorts of policies that aren't pertinent. Nobody pays attention."

He added, laughing derisively: "We're not even going to ignore them."

If these are the bleakest of times for the National Assembly and the fractured opposition, they could not get much brighter for the Constituent Assembly and the United Socialist Party. Buoyed by a lopsided victory in regional elections in favor of the Maduro camp, the Constituent Assembly voted last week to move up the date of municipal elections, in part to take advantage of the opposition's disarray.

The Constituent Assembly has also been passing resolutions with alacrity, and discussing an array of bills, representatives said.

Critics, however, contend that the 545-member body, a big-tent congress intended to represent all sectors of society, is an artifice, and that its decisions are essentially controlled by Mr. Maduro and the assembly's top officials.

Constituent Assembly members say that while all the votes in the full sessions have been unanimous, genuine debates have unfolded in the committees, which are not open to the public.

Sinecio Mujica, a member of the Constituent Assembly who runs a farming cooperative in the state of Zulia, said of the Maduro administration: "They have influence, undoubtedly. But they don't decide, they propose."

On Tuesday afternoon, after the National Assembly representatives had forlornly left the Capitol, members of the Constituent Assembly arrived for their own meeting, first gathering amid the palm trees and colonnades of the building's plaza for a homage to a popular singer.

The constituents enjoyed a buffet of hors d'oeuvres and assorted beverages. Dance music blasted from speakers. Celebration was in the air.

Even as the Maduro administration has allowed the National Assembly's offices to fall into disrepair, it has been finishing the renovation of a building to serve as the Constituent Assembly's administrative headquarters. The edifice is visible from the National Assembly's building, and at night its facade is bathed in the glow of soft spotlights: a victors' taunt.

The National Assembly building was once abuzz with activity and energy, its corridors jammed and its conference rooms busy at all hours. Now, with legislative activity at a near-standstill, it is moribund, a portrait of decay and futility.

Late on a recent morning, Adel Calzadilla, a legislator's assistant, was sitting in front of his computer in a dreary, windowless room in the offices of the Carabobo state delegation. What had he been up to all day?

"Nothing," he replied. His depressing admission hung heavily in the air. "I have to tell the truth: All the personnel here don't do anything."

"We're going from bad to worse," he added. "It's very sad."

Staff members loyal to the opposition say they are motivated by the promise of a paycheck and by the faith, however slender, that whatever work they are able to accomplish may one day bear fruit in a post-Maduro political world.

Javier Rivas, 25, a lawyer on the staff of the Domestic Policy Commission, is among the very few men in the building who still wear ties to work, a throwback to bygone days, before sports jerseys in the office became more common than sport coats. For him, the sartorial choice is a show of support for a beleaguered institution, an act of resistance against decay.

"You can't let the adversities of the government, or the social and economic situation, defeat you," he said.

It's an increasingly lonely struggle, he acknowledges, but one he has no intention of abandoning.

Ana Vanessa Herrero contributed reporting.

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